

northwest

'The Premier Civil Rights Issue of Our Time'

Gubernatorial candidates talk straight on queer issues

by Jaymee R. Cuti

While many a queer eye is focused on the race to elect the Multnomah County chair, another powerful seat influencing civil rights, health care, education and a variety of issues crucial to all Oregonians is up for grabs.

Gov. Ted Kulongoski is being challenged by two Democrats, Lane County Commissioner Pete Sorenson and former Oregon Treasurer Jim Hill.

Waiting in the wings for November's general election is state Sen. Ben Westlund of Tumalo, an unpredictable Independent who stood prominently for civil unions with a compelling speech supporting Senate Bill 1000 on the Senate floor. He was a chief sponsor and architect of the civil unions and nondiscrimination bill.

"I'm very much a respecter of individual differences and diversity...whether it falls into the area of civil rights or a fellow human being needing alcohol and drug services. I feel we have an obligation to respect those people for who they are and what they need," said Westlund.

Westlund, a recovering alcoholic of 25 years, entered rehabilitation after a drunken driving and cocaine possession conviction in Portland in 1982. He calls the experience "life changing."

Another event that carved his path from rancher with rural roots to accomplished senator with an eye on Salem was his 2003 bout with lung cancer. After a May 2003 diagnosis, surgery, radiation and chemotherapy, he describes a new lease on life and will to give back.

Not surprisingly, among a list of priorities on his



Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski defends his seat from Democrats in this month's primary election.

platform—tax restructuring, a shift from foreign oil to solar energy and reducing the gridlock of partisan politics—Westlund is crafting a plan to bring health care to all Oregonians. He is advocating for two separate initiatives that will increase health care access and ensure basic health care to all Oregon children.

Critics have viewed Westlund's shift from Republican to Independent as opportunistic, yet the senator contends he is fed up with party politics, a sentiment he believes is echoed by voters.

"Part of what this whole campaign is about is excessive partisanship," he said. He dropped his Republican affiliation in February when he announced his run for governor. Conservatives in his district had pegged him as a RINO (Republican in Name Only) and even threatened Westlund with a recall because of his support for civil unions.

"Ask any Oregonian to describe themselves, and very few will list party first, second or even third," said Westlund. "No label can accurately describe the depth of our emotions, the complexity of our opinions, the strength of our values, the independence of the human spirit."

One decision made by Westlund might leave queer voters queasy. He endorsed Measure 36, the same-sex marriage ban.

According to Westlund, he was asked to endorse the discriminatory measure as he crossed the lawn of St. Charles Hospital for his third cancer operation. He calls the decision a mistake and chalks it up to being drugged in preparation for the surgery.

All of Kulongoski's Democratic challengers also

claim to support the queer community in its fight for civil rights.

For Hill, the argument was quite personal.

"I believe that gay people are going through the same process that African Americans go through in terms of civil rights," said Hill, who is African American. "The rights of any of us cannot be dependent on the approval of other people. I want [Just Out readers] to understand I will stand up and advocate for them. It's not to get their support; it's because it's the right thing to do. For me, that's what the American dream is."

Hill was honored by the American Civil Liberties Union in 1983 when he stood up for queer rights during his first session in the Legislature. He chose to include gays and lesbians in an anti-racial harassment bill, despite threats of a veto from then Gov. Victor Atiyeh.

"I faced the choice of losing a bill that was important to the African-American community or standing up for the gay and lesbian community, and I stood up for [adding] sexual orientation to the bill. I did it because I don't believe that anybody's rights are more important than anybody else's rights," said Hill.

Sorenson's queer rights record includes showing support for commissioners in Multnomah and Benton counties during their controversial same-sex marriage decisions in 2004; hosting a meeting in Lane County to discuss the topic; hiring an openly gay legislative assistant during his term as state senator; fighting referrals planned in response to the defeats of Measures 9 and 13 in 1992 and



State Sen. Ben Westlund dropped his party affiliation to run for governor.



Jim Hill says he will fight for queer equality.

1994, respectively; and, as chairman of the Lane Community College board, influencing the school to add sexual orientation to its anti-discrimination policy in the late '80s. In 1994, Sorenson was endorsed by Basic Rights Oregon.

"I've enjoyed strong support from gays and lesbians in our community for various offices and elections," Sorenson said.

The commissioner's plan for supporting sexual minorities in the future was couched in a dig against Kulongoski.

"I'm not big on task forces. I'm big on accountability," said Sorenson, referring to Kulongoski's recently formed Task Force on Equality. "My main objective would be to follow through on the passage of Senate Bill 1000."

Sorenson also criticized the governor's perceived lack of follow-through after introducing the civil unions bill.

"I participated in a protest against the governor and [House] Speaker [Karen] Minnis in their failure to advance the legislation once it had passed the Senate," he said. "My proposal would be to get the bill passed as an interim step and then, in terms of accountability, to be vigilant with the attorney general and local governments in the state to make sure state-modeled nondiscrimination practices [happen] and appointments of people of various sexual orientations [are made] so that this issue, which I think is the premier civil rights issue of our time, will be moved into the history books." jo

For more information about the candidates, visit www.jimhill2006.com, www.petesorenson.com, www.benwestlund.com and www.tedforgov.com.



Lane County Commissioner Pete Sorenson has a history of supporting sexual minority causes.

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